

Trafficking Victims: Helping to Stop Abuse

Inside a clothing factory on the outskirts of Los Angeles, with bars on the windows and doors locked all around, Florencia was directed to a small storage room, ten by ten. Party dresses hung on racks there.

But this was no party. This is where she was to sleep at night. Her day began at 5:30 in the morning at a sewing machine, and continued with cutting cloth and cleaning the factory. After 17 hours of hard labor, she was led back to the storage room. In between, she had one meal, rice and beans, and ten minutes to eat it.

"I was enslaved," said Florencia, now 33, originally from Mexico. "I come from a small town. But here I was in a huge country and I was enslaved and no one knew about it."

Florencia had been wooed by a woman who came to her village in 2001. "She invited me to come to the U.S.," she remembered, "She said that I would have a job, a place to live. It sounded great. I had three children, and I had to feed them. As soon as I arrived, everything changed," she said.

The woman demanded \$2,500 from Florencia, which she did not have. Florencia was ordered to work it off at the factory. "She told me if I went to the police, nobody would believe me," said Florencia, who spoke no English at the time. The woman physically abused her, pulling her hair and pinching. "She said if I did *anything* wrong, my family would pay the price and that she knew where my children were. I was afraid."

When federal agents sent an undercover agent inside the factory, after she had spent 40 tormented days there, the govern-

Mexican, Filipino. Most find their way to legal assistance after being rescued by first responders, such as police or nonprofit social services organizations, according to Sheila Neville, staff attorney with the project.

But many trafficking victims are identified only when they seek assistance with some other issue. "Awareness of trafficking is where awareness of domestic violence was 30 years ago. There's a problem with under-identification. We're still raising awareness on this issue," said Neville. "Nobody self-identifies, comes in and says, 'I am a trafficking victim.' They might come in with a domestic violence case, but fit the definition of trafficking."

Without trained intake screeners, legitimate trafficking victims can be turned away as undocumented immigrants, she said. Before the recent trafficking laws were passed, victims had no protection from deportation. Although the program can help them apply for a T visa, the visa's usage remains limited and only 800 have been approved since 2002 when they were first authorized. Yet, once an individual is certified as a trafficking victim by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, she is not only protected from deportation, but able to access special financial support. "It's especially important to trafficking victims who suffer from trauma," said Neville.

In order to expand its outreach, LAFLA has a paralegal who works with local community groups to increase trafficking awareness. The outreach is supported by a grant from the Office of Refugee Resettlement of HHS. The program provided direct services to 133 trafficking victims in fiscal year 2004, more than

The Legal Services Corporation has issued updated guidance to LSC-funded programs on how they may represent victims of human trafficking. The guidance is available on LSC's website, www.lsc.gov

"Awareness of trafficking is where awareness of domestic violence was 30 years ago." —Sheila Neville, LAFLA staff attorney

ment closed it. Florencia agreed to testify against the trafficker. "Someone had to stop her," she said. "She kept my dream, my freedom, and no one is allowed to keep your freedom. Freedom is for everyone."

Florencia was a victim of human trafficking, a subject of increasing concern in the United States. The Trafficking Victims Violence Protection Act, or TVPA, was passed by Congress in 2000. Amended in 2003, it increases the criminal penalties for traffickers and provides protection for its victims. By government estimates, there are 20,000 people trafficked into the U.S. every year. The law authorizes legal services programs to represent trafficking survivors regardless of their immigration status.

Human trafficking occurs when someone is brought to the country and compelled or coerced to work in the commercial sex trade, is a minor induced to engage in commercial sex acts, or are persons forced or fraudulently recruited, harbored, or transported for labor or services that subject them to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery. Many, like Florencia, are forced into sweatshop factories; others are forced to work in fields and even private homes. Victims may be eligible for a special "T visa" if they assist in the investigation and prosecution of cases, and they are eligible for special government benefits.

The Legal Assistance to Trafficking Victims Project, run by the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles (LAFLA), an LSC-funded program, provides direct representation to victims, such as Florencia. Clients in the trafficking project are from a variety of backgrounds: Thai, Vietnamese, Korean, Central American,

all of the other legal services programs combined, which served another 37 victims, according to a report by the U.S. Department of Justice.

The expertise developed in L.A. is also the basis for training lawyers, police and social service agencies across the country. The "STOP the Traffic: Slavery Training and Outreach Project" was one of only four programs—and the only LSC project—to secure a grant for training and technical assistance on human trafficking from HHS—it has created materials, ranging from a detailed 300 page manual on trafficking laws, procedures, and ramifications, to comic books aimed at community groups.

As a trainer, Neville speaks to groups as disparate as legal services in the Bronx and law enforcement offices in New Mexico. A September 2005 conference in California carries the title "Hiding in Plain Sight: How can we find and protect child victims of trafficking." She said that police officers, who may suddenly encounter trafficking victims in a prostitution bust or other crack-down, ask practical questions—Who should they call? What is the protocol? Where will the victim sleep? "If someone is just liberated from a situation, the first thing they need—if they are physically okay—is a place to stay," said Neville. Then, she will describe a national network of shelters that are available to help.

Florencia, now learning English and working as a store cashier in L.A., wants to send another message. "If someone is in my situation, I want to tell them that help is there. They have to speak out. Legal aid is there, and they could listen to them, like they did to me."—C.C.